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The Christian Conception of Property

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Property and its management is one of the great questions of our day, and Christianity must have something to say about it. We are in an age when wealth is increasing at a prodigious rate, and connected with its increase as well as with its possession many knotty and serious problems, most of them moral, have arisen. There has never been a day since men began to own things that they have owned as many as they do now. The wealth of the United States in the last 25 years has increased enormously and will probably keep on doing so with even greater rapidity. As time goes by inventive men will continue to find new sources of wealth in unsuspected places. Coal was once black rock with no value whatever; now it is wealth of vast value. The waterfall was once a sight, a thing beautiful and wonderful to look at; now it is so much power to be capitalized and sold on the market. Iron ore beds were once so much unproductive land; now they are mines of fabulous wealth; and so on over the whole face of nature. The more we know about our earth the richer it becomes to us. We cannot stop this and would not if we could. It is part of the mind of God for us. We were told in Eden to take the earth and subdue it and rule it, and every triumph of science over nature is a step forward in the program of Paradise.

There is No Blessing So Blessed that a Curse Does Not Lurk On Its Offside

But like everything else wealth is attended with difficulty and travail. The devil is watching it as well as the angels and will turn it to account if he can, and has had large success in doing it hitherto. Property in its primal intent and in its essential nature is a God-bestowed blessing, but like every other blessing will darken down into a curse if it is not used according to the mind of the great Giver, for, as some one has said, there is no blessing so blessed that a curse does not lurk on its off-side.

So out of wealth and the thirst for its possession there has proceeded the vilest troupe of crimes and meannesses that have ever disgraced our race; envy, strife, brutality, war, murder, worldliness and neglect of God without measure. We are learning that one of

the most dangerous things that can happen to society is for the wrong kind of a man to get rich. Wealth in the wrong hands means vulgarity and Godlessness sooner or later. Whence came strikes, war between capital and labor, social bitterness, false standards of success, hatred of the poor toward the rich and contempt of the poor by the rich, disregard of God and inhumanity to man? Out of property, not all of it but a lot of it. It creates artificial distinctions that cuts society in two, and that try as we will we cannot keep out of the Church of God. It is the source of more of the world's unbrotherliness than any other one thing, or all other things.

So the world needs a Christian philosophy of wealth, and needs it sadly. What is the mind of Christ about this thing so potent of blessing and yet so productive of devilishness? We are warranted in assuming, as Christians we must assume, that the evil twist that has been given to it is because we have left Christ out of account in handling it.

Not the Extravagance of the Mohammedan But the Way the Christian Acts With His Money that Pinches

More than this, a vast proportion of the world's wealth is in the possession of people who call themselves Christians, the very people over whom the Church has most influence and for whose beliefs and behavior she is most responsible. It is not pagan property that is vexing society today, or at least it is not property in pagan lands. It is almost entirely a Christian problem, for an amazing share of the worldly goods of our planet is in Christian hands. We are not shamed by the overfed worldliness of the Chinaman or the vulgar extravagance of the Mohammedan or the financial tyranny of the Hindu or even by the diamond bespattered shirt-front of the Hebrew. It is the way the Christian is acting with his money that is pinching us. It is a home problem, a family affair, and we need only to look behind our own door to see how much linen is to be washed. When Christian people extend their christianity to their property the rest of mankind will not need to concern us.

Christ Was Not an Economist

Now be it said before we go further that Christ was not an economist. He was supremely a teacher of religion. Socialists and capitalists have both claimed Him, but neither has any right to him except to submit to him and obey him like other sinners.

But his religion infuses and controls all life, and because Christ was a teacher of religion of necessity he had something to say on

economics. Because man must have food to eat and raiment to put on and houses to live in Christianity must have a word to say about how these necessities are obtained and how they are used. They belong to life and, therefore, are in the domain of His religion. But beyond this our Lord had a great deal to say to people who had a surplus, the prosperous of his day. He did not talk to millionaires for there were none, but to the prosperous farmers and merchants and shepherds who were about him. Then, as now, there were people who had vastly more food than they could eat, more raiment than they needed to put on, and for this reason they were an especially needy lot of sinners and called for extra instruction and warning.

Money is "Tainted" Quite as Much in the Way It is Used As in the Way It is Acquired

Christ was as much concerned about how people used their money as about how they made it. It could be "tainted" by wrong use or non-use as well as by vicious methods of acquiring it. He had no panacea by which the financial tyrannies and economic inequalities and injustices of the world could be rectified. But while he laid down no program he did enunciate some principles that must govern all life, the possession of wealth included. Chief among them was his law of love and service. Love in his view does not exist unless it expresses itself in sacrifice and service. A selfish love is unthinkable. Because he loved men he gave up his life for them. He had to do it. The fact of His loving made the cross inevitable. This law governed the use of His wealth, and it must govern the use the disciple makes of all he has. The man who withholds any part of his life from the operation of this law has not caught the spirit of Christ and is none of his. His property, like the talents of his mind, the graces of his heart and the energies of his body, is not owned for himself but for the good he can do with it.

Riches Are Always a Needle's Eye Proposition Unless Held in Trust

In the Christian view of things, then, no man owns anything. We are not our own but are bought with a price. As He surrendered Himself to us, so must we surrender all to Him and the uses of His kingdom. We may put one-tenth into the treasury for specifically religious and benevolent uses, but the nine-tenth we keep is as much His as the one-tenth we give away. We are stewards not owners. On the assumption that I love humanity as much as Christ loves me what shall I do with my money? No Christian can escape this ques-

tion. The only way we can give to Christ is to give to the world for which Christ died. He made this very clear when he was here. Wealth has no right to call itself Christian unless it submits to this law. It is the acid test of our Christian quality. Riches are always a needle's eye proposition unless they are held and used as a trust for Christ and in no other way.

Wealth is Given the Chance of a Thousand Years to Save Itself

Jesus never looked on money as a primary good, a thing to be sought and possessed for its own sake. When it is wanted for its own sake, as an end instead of a means to do good, it becomes a snare and a menace. It blots out the sight of God, dulls the conscience and blunts and dwarfs the whole spiritual nature. "How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God"; riches that are only riches and not a means for carrying out the loving purposes of the Father. Without the right motive behind it, the motive of love and service, wealth is like fire arms and edged tools in the hands of children, a source of danger both to ourselves and the community. The only way it can be saved from harmfulness is to employ it for others in accordance with the will of Christ.

Christianity does not decry wealth; it only insists that it be kept in its right place; as an instrument for promoting the kingdom of heaven. God has given it a worthy place in his campaign for the world when it submits itself to Him. It is a necessary factor in the program of Christ, and never more so than today. There is at this hour a door of dignity and honor and service open to wealth never beheld before. God is giving it the chance of a thousand years to save itself. Men of means, big and little, have an opportunity to make their gifts tell for Christ and world redemption possessed by no other generation of Christians the sun has seen.

Money-Making is the Genius of the Age

The Church has always made use of the salient characteristics of the epochs thru which she was passed to advance her purposes and push her campaign. Witness how she turned to account the spirit of discovery and adventure that followed the voyages of Columbus to America; the use she made of the printing press and the revival of learning; the philosophic speculation of the 16th and 17th centuries; the tidal wave of liberty and popular government of the 18th century, and so on. We are a moneymaking age. Our men have a genius for it possessed by none who have preceded them. Has

Christ no claim on this marvelous gift for acquisition? Is Christianity to make no signal use of this outstanding, unique feature of our day? If not it will be a dead day, a truly dark age in the history of our world and the kingdom of our Lord. But let the Christian conception of serving rather than of being served, of giving not hoarding, have its way and this will be the brightest day mankind has seen since Christ went on high.

Let the pulpit bear down on this. The Church does not want her people to make less money, but to keep less of it and to realize what they have it for, to show their love for Christ by it and to use it as He used His own life, not for His own sake but for the sake of the world.

Did Zaccheus Restore Only His Wrongful Gains?

Let us learn and teach that no man can catch the spirit of Christ without awaking to the obligation money imposes. As soon as Zaccheus got a glimpse at the meaning of Christ he thought of his money and what he should do with it. He immediately proposed to do the thing he felt his Master would want done. As soon as he had a Christian experience he loosened up, a genuine mark of Christian experience ever since. His idea was very rudimentary, to be sure. Of course he had no business keeping money he had obtained wrongfully, and must restore it. But we imagine he was not long in the Christian life until he learned that Christ had claims on the money he had gotten honestly, and if he were going to be Christ's he must loosen up there also.

Nothing was said about how the Rich Young Ruler came by his riches. It is assumed that they were legitimate. But Christ made it clear that it was not legitimate for him to hold them while there were poor to be helped and his own soul was being damaged.

There is No Blessing By Itself in Being Rich

There is no blessing *per se* in being rich. On the contrary there is distinct danger in it. The blessing comes from making the right use of it. We must make it serve in order to make it safe, safe for ourselves and safe for society. One of its misuses is that it is made a means to buy service rather than to render service. The world's idea has always been that the more people a man has working for him the greater he is; the Christian idea is that the more people he is working for the greater he is. There is nothing blessed about commanding service. On the contrary it is likely to vulgarize and cheapen. The blessing is in rendering it. Wealth in the Christian view is simply so much opportunity to serve.

Not the Red Flag But the Cross is the Solvent of Economic Ills

It needs to be preached also that in this Christian conception of property, and there alone, is to be found the solvent of the serious economic and social problems confronting our generation, and they are acutely serious. Wealth must solve them for wealth has created them. It is not the mind of Christ that the wrongs of society should be righted by the poor rising up and confiscating the property of the rich. Instead He laid it on the rich that they should realize their responsibility and use their wealth so as not only to right wrong but avoid it by installing righteousness. In the Christian conception of the matter the rich are responsible for the poor, for we are all responsible for each other. The burden of the weak is on the strong. Wealth can meet the conditions that have arisen out of it by submitting itself to the Christ law of love and service, and if it does not it confronts danger every hour. The red flag is ceaselessly before it.

The Alternative—Christianized Wealth or Barrabas the Anarchist

Which of the twain will we have? Christianized wealth or paganized disorder and anarchy? The Jews before Pilate rejected Christ and chose Barrabas the anarchist. Are we confronted with the same alternative? Is wealth in America making the same choice? Many earnest souls think so. Explosive material lies beneath the social surface and fires of discontent and resentment and bitterness are smouldering perilously near. Whether they ever break out to the disruption of society is for the men of wealth, more than any other class to decide. The only way they can save themselves is to make their wealth sacrificial and lay it on Christ's altar of love and service. There is grave reason to fear that the Christian grace of self-denial is a lost art in America. We have grown so fat and prosperous that we have forgotten the meaning of sacrifice, and such a soil cannot grow great Christians. When society in the past has gotten into this condition God has uprooted it and pushed men out among the thorns and thistles to begin over again, as He drove the first pair from Eden when they began to use it for their own indulgence.

The Heritage of War—for America a Soul Seared and Encased in a Bloated Pocketbook

It is not only hard for a rich man to get into heaven but it seems equally hard for him to know what is going on in the world beneath him. As he grows richer he grows remote from his less fortunate

fellows, and few men of wealth are aware of the mutterings and scowls around them. Christ knows the common people better than any captain of industry the world has ever seen, and when He says "sell what thou had and **give**, take up the cross of sacrifice and deny thyself" He is simply pointing out the path to safety. Our fear for America is that while Europe is suffering and sacrificing in the throes of her awful war we are merely content to make money out of the world's travail. If this be so we will come out of the war vastly worse than Europe, for her people will receive the refinement and chastening that always result from sacrifice and suffering while our portion will be a seared soul encased in a bloated pocket-book. Jesus Christ cannot do anything for us without the law of the Cross. We might as well expect electricity to light our houses without wires or lamps as to expect Him to save us from our perils without the spirit and the fact of sacrifice.

Love and Service; Confiscated Wealth and Social Disruption— Which?

So we come again to the old alternative of Pilate:—which of the twain will ye have released unto you? Jesus with His sacrificial law of love and service, or confiscated wealth and social disruption? The choice, we repeat, does not lie with the agitator but with the man of means. It turns on how far he is willing to be Christian with his wealth. Will he go the whole length, or like the Rich Young Ruler will he turn away sorrowful but doomed? The responsibility is his. You can no more save wealth without Jesus Christ than you can save souls without Him. Apart from Him it is bound to turn suicide and destroyer. All down the ages it has eaten the heart out of every nation and every social condition it has dominated, and it will do it for us unless it is held and used in the spirit of the Master. God cannot afford to let it survive unless he is allowed to control it. This is the lesson of history as well as of the Bible.

Furthermore, wealth is in a mind today to listen to this sort of preaching. It is more serious minded, more sensitive to responsibility than ever before, and waits to be led. The arrogant rich are a distinctly diminishing company. Let the Church do her duty and in love declare the will of Christ, and all this tremendous power can be made constructive by being laid at the feet of Him whose right it is to rule it.